

Professional Training in Public Administration in Romania during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract. *Professional training is a basic element in the professional development of any employee, especially considering the evolution of the last months, marked by the Covid-19 pandemic and important economic and social changes. The crisis caused by the pandemic and the disappearance of many jobs, forces employees to professional conversions or to sharpen the area of activity by acquiring new, sometimes challenging skills.*

The aim of the study is to analyze the professional training activity in the public administration during the COVID-19 pandemic, to identify the advantages and disadvantages of training in the online system, the efficiency of this type of training, as well as the factors that would have a positive impact on a good performance of this activity. The research method is quantitative, based on the opinion survey, through the self-administered questionnaire.

Employees are open to training, especially when dealing with new jobs and technologies or simply to stay up to date with the latest information in their field. Employers, in turn, want professional, efficient and motivated employees. Vocational training is a necessary tool to remain competitive in the labor market and to face the challenges of a global economy where digital skills are the key factor.

Keywords: *COVID-19, public administration, Romania, training*

Introduction

The pandemic caused by the COVID-19 virus has caused a series of major changes in all fields of activity (Florescu & Burlacu, 2021). At the state level, a series of measures were taken to limit the spread of the pandemic, which had an immediate impact at the social, economic, educational, etc. levels (Popescu et al. 2021).

Practically, in a very short time, the globalized society has turned into a monolithic society, the only ways of access to the borders of an interconnected world being online, respectively digital (Meuleman, 2021). Both public and private organizations have been forced to adapt to the new context so that they are able to change course at any moment to compensate for the increased speed of change (Pendall, Foster and Cowell, 2009). Faced with the multitude of emerging, large-scale

changes, the management of organizations has taken measures to reorganize processes, such as: the large-scale use of telework, the shift or individualization of the work schedule, the digitization or intensification of the digitization of some processes, remote coordination of teams etc (Negescu et al, 2021). Romania, like the other states of the world, in a very short period of time, had to adapt and face all the challenges generated by the pandemic (Radulescu et al., 2021; Belostecinic et al., 2022).

A series of normative acts, of primary or secondary level, regulated the conduct of activities during this period, both at the level of public authorities and institutions, as well as private organizations (Sarbu et al., 2021). All these changes have caused many activities to go online (Burlacu et al., 2020), and one of the most strongly affected areas has been the educational one (Burlacu et al., 2021). So, we can say that this health crisis has placed the didactic process in the online space. According to Håkansson and Bejaković (2020), this is "the biggest disruption that teaching/learning has ever seen because after this period, learning will never be the same".

Literature review

The public administration in Romania is in a continuous process of reform, and for the successful implementation of the changes, a well-trained human resource is needed (Burlacu, 2009; Ionita & Burlacu, 2009; Profiroiu et al., 2019). We observe that, both at the level of the European Union and Romania, attention is constantly directed towards the professionalization and improvement of the professional performance of human resources, through the acquisition or development of skills, in relation to the trends in the field of professional training and of the development of new technologies (Marinică, 2020).

According to the Administrative Code, professional training is a right and an obligation, both for civil servants and for contractual staff within public authorities and institutions. The code regulates the professional training activity for elected officials as well as high-ranking civil servants, prefects and sub-prefects, civil servants, and contract staff. The training of administration staff, both in theory and practice, is increasingly crucial as the nature of administrative activity becomes more specialized and complex. This is particularly important due to the significant transformations that public administration is currently undergoing, which are a direct result of environmental changes in which it operates (Katsamunskaja, 2018).

Until the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, professional training for Romanian public administration staff was carried out by public or private training providers mainly in the traditional (classical) or hybrid/mixed (blended learning) system, however, with the measures imposed by the authorities, it was necessary to rapidly adapt the way of providing professional training programs and the large-scale introduction of training programs in the online system (e-learning).

If in professional training in the classic system, training programs are carried out without the contribution of technology, and training materials are delivered through traditional methods, the mixed or hybrid model combines the traditional manner of training sessions with the opportunities offered by e-learning (Pynes, 2013; Stoica & Burlacu, 2017).

The most common use of the term blended learning refers to a combination of traditional, face-to-face and online instruction (Burlacu & Grosu, 2009; Simonson, Smaldino, Zvacek, 2015). "These mixed training environments define a reality that tries to combine the benefits and remove the disadvantages of different models, more precisely, traditional training and e-learning in an active learning environment" (Zhang, Welch & Miao, 2018). Some authors believe that blended learning will become the "new traditional model" (Buzoianu et al., 2021) or the "new normal" in course delivery (Burlacu, 2014; Saliterer, Jones and Steccolini, 2017).

Practically, the professional training in the blended learning system, for public administration personnel, is organized in: the teaching part, which in most cases is carried out in a classic system (face to face) and the existence of a learning management system (MOODLE, MOOC, etc.) (Figure 1).

In the period 2020-2022, especially in 2020, a series of restrictive measures required that professional training take place online, to respect physical distancing and limit the spread of the pandemic. In this context, professional training providers had to adapt to the context and move from professional training in the classic system or blended learning, to training in the online system.

Vocational training in the online system presents several advantages and disadvantages (Moller, 2020). Among the advantages of online training, the following can be mentioned: learning system centered on the needs of the learner; training materials available on any type of device (computer, laptop, tablet, phone); reduced budget expenses (elimination of transport, accommodation and per diem expenses); ensuring the continuity of the participants' activity in the institutions they come from; high degree of accessibility; availability of training resources for the asynchronous format (possibility of accessing them at any interval) (Burlacu, Grigorescu et al., 2013).

Among the disadvantages of online training, the following can be listed: lack of physical interaction; the degree of accessibility to the Internet connection (and its quality) differs between rural and urban environments; online training programs may emphasize technology rather than content and learning opportunities; some topics cannot be very well adapted to online delivery, so as to lead to the acquisition of the established skills; using online tools requires a range of IT skills from both learners and trainers (Burlacu & Neagu, 2007).

As stated in a study by the European Commission (2020a), "COVID-19 is reviving the need to explore online teaching and learning opportunities". Another study by the European Commission (2020b) on vocational education and training points out that this period represents an opportunity to adopt a new approach to vocational education and training, so that they become more modern, more attractive, and more flexible. The current online experience will impact the future of education, and future research is needed to understand both the positive and negative aspects of this sudden change (Tartavulea et al., 2020).

Methodology

The present research represents a pilot study, conducted in institutions of the central public administration in Romania regarding the professional training of public administration personnel during the COVID-19 pandemic. The aim of the study is to analyze the professional training activity in the public administration during the COVID-19 pandemic, to identify the advantages and disadvantages of training in the online system, the efficiency of this type of training, as well as the factors that would have a positive impact on a good performance of this activity.

The study started from the following research questions: 1. What was the way in which professional training programs were carried out during the pandemic? 2. Is conducting professional training programs in the online system more efficient and appropriate than in the classic and blended system? 3. What factors significantly contribute to the optimal and efficient conduct of professional training activities in the online system? 4. Is it preferable that vocational training continues to take place in the online system?

The present study is quantitative research, conducted in institutions of the central public administration in Romania, using as a research method the opinion survey, through the self-

administered questionnaire. The questionnaire was developed by the authors, considering the characteristics of the professional training process in the public administration. The questionnaire consists of 18 questions, four of which were aimed at identifying elements of the participants such as: the institution in which they work, seniority in the public administration, type of position held and age. The rest of the questions were created with the aim of analyzing the professional training process during the pandemic, being closed questions with simple or multiple answers, as well as questions with responses measured on the Likert scale. The sampling method used was that of convenience, the participating institutions being chosen based on accessibility. The questionnaire was sent to 40 institutions in the central public administration, under the coordination/subordination of some ministries. The data were processed through the SPSS 22.0 application. The data were interpreted to answer the proposed research questions.

Results and discussion

Main characteristics of the population included in the sample

Figure 1 shows the distribution of respondents according to the position they hold and the category they belong to. The majority – 88% are civil servants, of which 82% are executive and 6% are management. The rest of the respondents - 12%, represent contract execution staff - 9% (23), respectively management- 3%. In the central public administration, according to the report of the National Agency of Public Servants on the management of the public function (2021), at the level of the categories of public functions, executive civil servants predominate, consequently the distribution of respondents is normal.

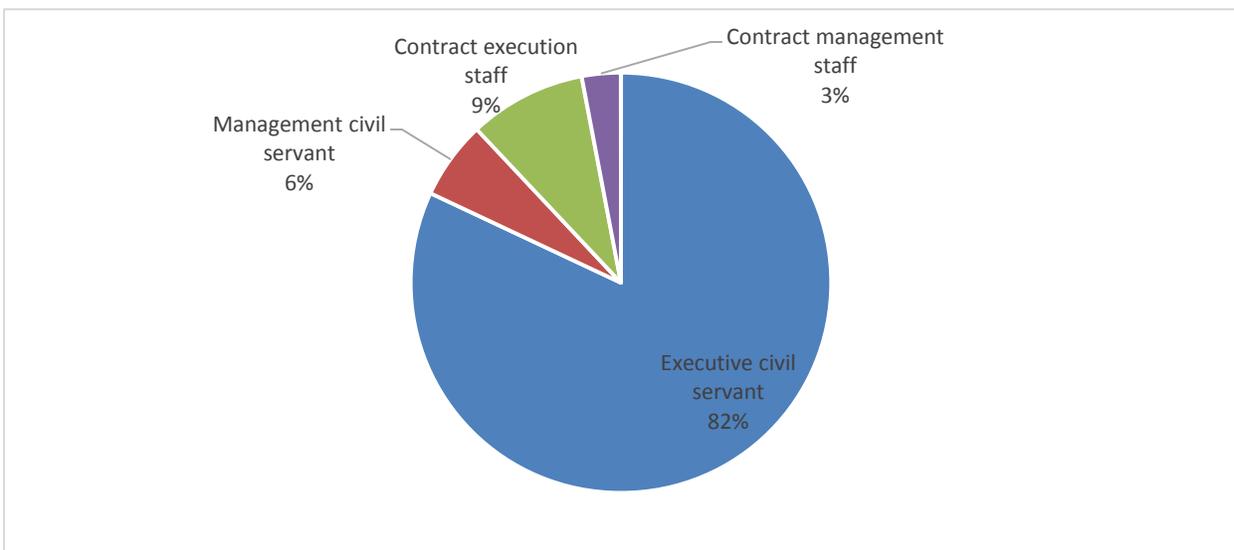


Figure 1. Distribution of respondents by type of position held

Source: Authors, own processing.

Regarding the distribution of respondents according to seniority in the public administration, presented in the figure below, most respondents - 62% have been working in the public administration for over 10 years. Only 7% of the participants have been working in the field for less than 1 year, a significant proportion-19%, for 1-4 years, and the rest-12% have a seniority of 5-10 years.

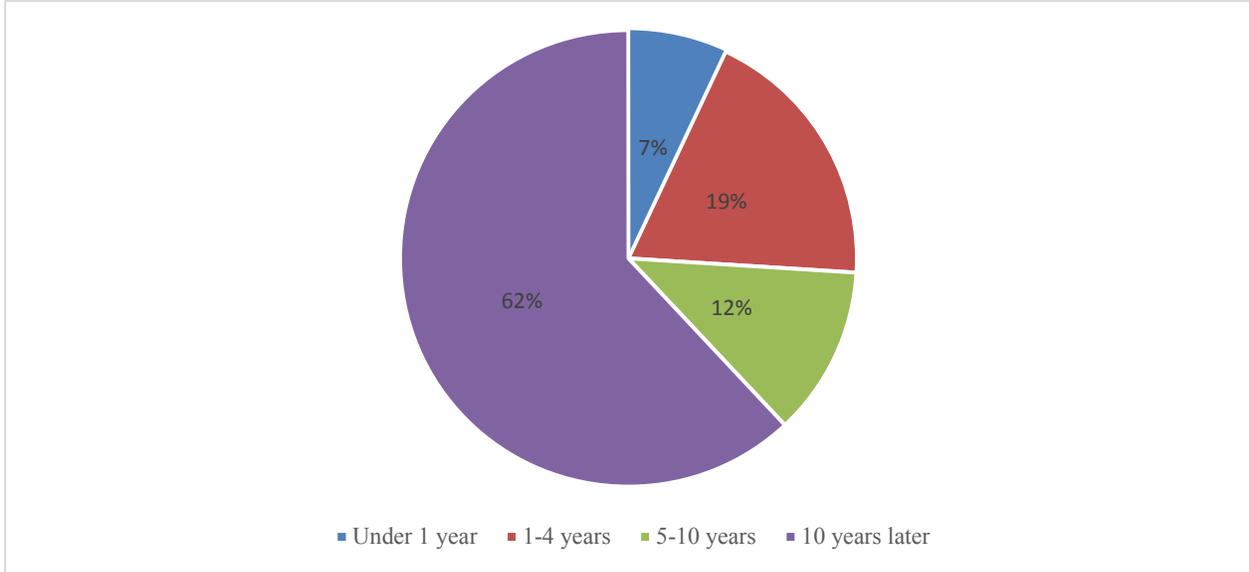


Figure 2. Distribution of respondents according to seniority in the public administration

Source: Authors, own processing.

Regarding the age of the study participants, as can be seen in Figure 3, the majority of participants- 53% are over 46 years old, 32% are between 36 and 45 years old and 14% are between 26 and 35 years old. The smallest proportion is of participants between the ages of 18 and 25, respectively 1%.

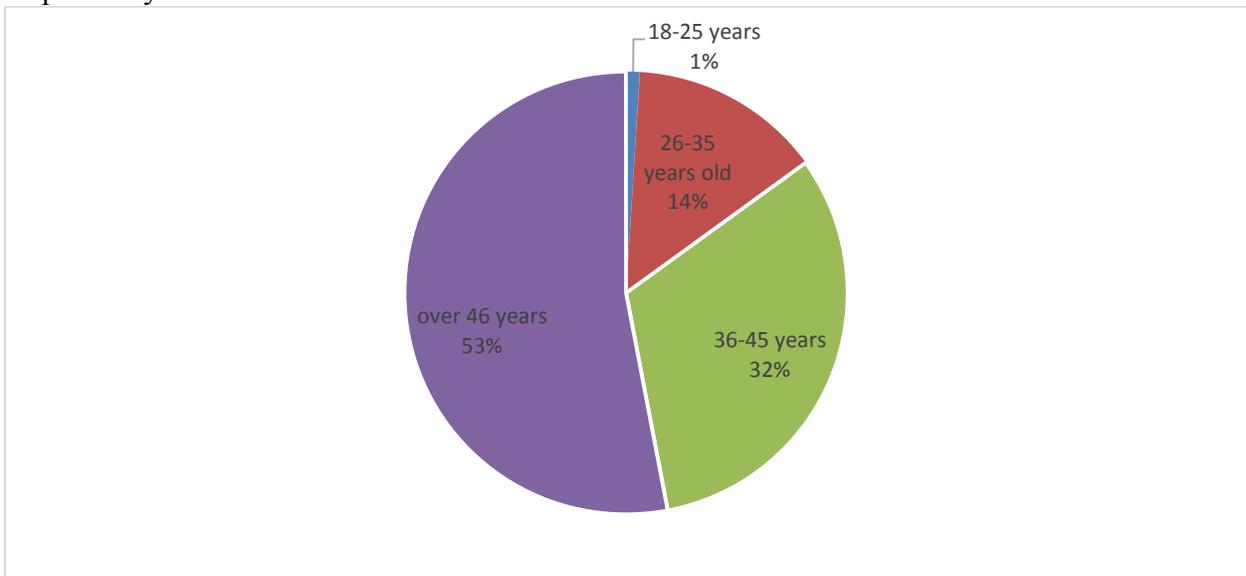


Figure 3. Distribution of respondents by age

Source: Authors, own processing.

Respondents were asked how many vocational training programs they participated in during 2020-2022. The largest proportion - 46% participated in 1-3 programs.

Only 17% followed more than 3 programs. However, a high percentage - 37%, declared that during the mentioned period they did not participate in any program.

Study participants were asked by whom the vocational training programs they attended were organized. They had a choice of three types of vocational training providers: the National Institute of Administration, other public training providers and private training providers. From the analysis of the answers, the percentage of participants who chose public training providers is higher, but this fact must be correlated with the method of financing, this criterion being among the main factors that determine participation in professional training programs. Another question aimed to find out who made the decision to participate in the vocational training programs.

Most respondents - 37% stated that the decision was made strictly by the hierarchical superior, and a similar proportion - 34% said that the decision belonged to them. The rest of the participants - 29% stated that the decision was both personal and that of the hierarchical superior. Table 1 shows the frequency of responses regarding the financing methods of vocational training programs.

Most respondents - 44%, said that the participation was not conditional on any cost, a similar percentage - 18.9% stated that the participation fees were covered from the institution's budget or from funds provided within some projects and 4.72 % covered the costs from their own sources. The rest of the participants stated that their participation fees were covered from all the previously mentioned sources.

Table 1. The main ways of financing professional training programs

Funding sources	Frequency of responses
From the institution's budget	18,9%
From own sources	4,72%
From external funds, within some projects	18,9%
Free participation	44,88%
From own sources, from external funds, within some projects	1,57%
From the institution's budget, from its own sources, the participation was free	1,57%
From own sources, from external funds, within some projects, participation was free	3,15%
From the institution's budget, from external funds, within some projects	6,3%

Source: Authors, own processing.

A very important question regarding vocational training during the pandemic was related to how the training programs were conducted. Most respondents - 62.16% participated in online professional training programs. The percentage is justified, considering the measures imposed by the authorities regarding limiting the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Another question concerned the degree of satisfaction of public administration personnel with the conduct of the professional training process in the online system.

From the analysis of the obtained data, an important percentage of the respondents - 38% consider that the online professional training corresponds to some extent to the expectations, an

answer that reiterates the data obtained regarding the effectiveness of the training programs in the online system compared to those in the classic format.

Moreover, the respondents were asked whether they would consider it appropriate that all vocational training programs should be carried out only in the online system. The majority of respondents- 54% - do not agree with the organization of professional training programs only in the online system. The answers to this question can be correlated with the answers about the digital skills needed to participate in online programs, as well as with the answers about some disadvantages of this type of training.

The elimination of transport, accommodation and per diem expenses was considered the biggest advantage by a significant number of respondents. The listed expenses represent a significant percentage of the total expenses regarding a person's participation in a training program, their elimination having a positive impact on the institution's budget, to offer the possibility of the participation of as many people as possible. Also, the respondents appreciate in a significant percentage the other advantages of training in the online system, namely: flexibility, accessibility, and innovation.

The main disadvantage identified by the participants in the professional training programs, in a significant number, is the lack of physical interaction, which can be analyzed both from the perspective of the interaction with the trainer and the interaction with the other participants.

Also, the adaptation of the topic to be successfully addressed in an online training program and the digital skills necessary for the participants, to participate in these forms of training, are identified as major disadvantages of training in the online system.

Regarding the importance of the key factors for the success of an online professional training program (Table 2), it is found that the aspects related to the trainer (experience and expertise) and the training tools and methods used, are identified by the respondents as the most important, at the opposite pole is the evaluation, a very important stage in the architecture of a professional training program, which requires elaborate studies and analyses, in order to optimize and adapt it for the online system. The analyzed data indicates to us that there is an increased interest in most areas of vocational training in which public administration personnel intend to follow programs.

Table 2. The importance of key factors to the success of a professional training program in the online system

Key factors	Not important at all	Very little important	Not important, not unimportant either	Important	Very important
The experience and expertise of the trainer	2,1%	0,8%	4,2%	7,5%	85,4%
Training materials used	2,1%	1,3%	7,5%	23,4%	65,7%
The training tools used by the trainer	2,5%	1,3%	5,9%	19,2%	71,1%
The topic and the competencies associated with the program	2,5%	0,8%	8,8%	18,8%	69%
Evaluation	4,6%	3,3%	17,2%	24,7%	50,2%

Source: Authors, own processing.

Regarding the professional training systems preferred by the respondents (see Figure 4), it is observed that the majority (46%) want to participate in programs carried out in the classical or blended learning system - 30%. Given the disadvantages associated with online vocational training

and the acquisition of ICT skills to successfully follow this type of training, the percentage obtained is justified and correlated with the answers to the previous questions.

It can also be added that this type of online training was introduced in a short period of time, without prior analysis, in order to adapt it to the profile of the beneficiary, being in a permanent dynamic, so that the participants is in the accommodation zone and the providers are still in the process of optimizing the tools used.

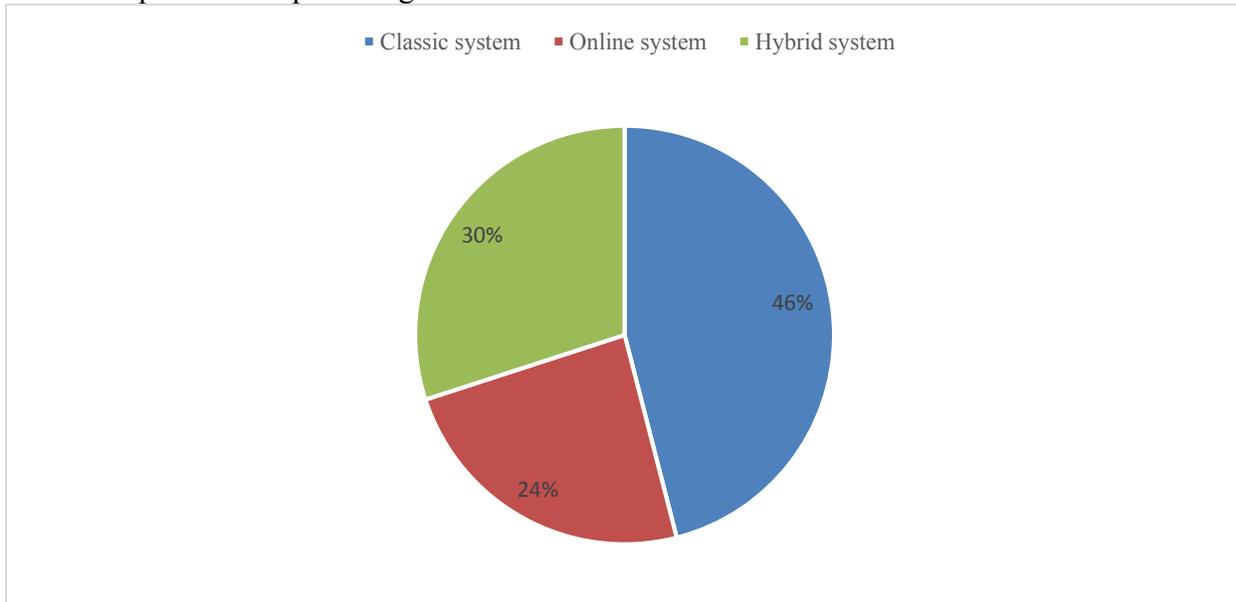


Figure 4. Preferred ways of participating in vocational training programs

Source: Authors, own processing.

Conclusion

Professional training is an important factor in the successful implementation of reform processes and, implicitly, in the modernization of public administration in Romania. The COVID-19 pandemic represented a new stage in terms of professional training, by accelerating the digitization process in the organization of training programs.

For this type of training to be effective and in line with the expectations of the beneficiaries, either directly - the participants, or indirectly - the organizations they belong to, we believe that studies and analyzes are necessary, to be carried out at the level of the entire public administration.

Likewise, optimizing the process also means a detailed analysis of its planning and organization, of the information technology skills that the trainers and trainees must have, of the methods and tools used. The development of the online training system involves investments by training providers in human, technological and financial resources.

With the relaxation of health measures and the return to training in the classic and blended system, the use of platforms and tools from the pandemic period must be continued and, at the same time, their permanent development, so that training programs in the online system become an important component of training professional. At the same time, the training programs in the online system can also contribute to the development of IT skills of the participants, which can have a positive impact in the current activity and in increasing the degree of digitization at the public administration level.

Another important aspect relates to the legislative field. A clearer regulation is needed regarding training in the online system, but also in the classic and blended system. Currently, the legislation governing vocational training for public administration does not deal in detail with quality assurance, acquired credits and other important aspects.

The study on professional training can be extended to a larger number of authorities and public institutions at the central and local level, so that the results obtained provide an overview of the professional training of staff within public authorities and institutions in Romania.

The limits of the research are given by the specifics of the research, respectively the availability and subjectivity of the respondents. Also, that future research directions can aim at replicating this research in European states similar in form of government, thus allowing a comparative analysis at the European level.

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